

Looking In

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: What could a clumsy nine-year-old boy possibly have in common with Superman?

The character of Superman belongs to Warner Brothers and DC Comics. All other characters herein are my own. This story is strictly not-for-profit.

My thanks, as always, to my friend, writing mentor, and beta reader, Corrina, for her encouragement and her story-improving suggestions. Thanks, too, to Classicalla (Nancy) for doing such a terrific job as a General Editor. Corrina and Nancy pointed out, and helped me to resolve, many problems with the story's contents and structure.

Here I sit waiting for another recess to end. At least I have a good book to keep me company. Sometimes I look at the other boys laughing and playing and long, just once, to be one of the group. Most of the time, though, I think, 'Who needs them?' Just because they are children, that's no excuse for them to act childish. I've always related better to adults; heck, most of my peers wouldn't even understand much of what I say. But when I am being most honest with myself, I know that that reaction is just sour grapes. I hate being on the outside, looking in. Ah, there's the bell. Another half-hour wasted. At least it was a good recess -- the other kids left me alone the whole time.

I hate the walk home after school. I never know when I'm going to run into Ted and Neil. I get as far as the nicer part of Clinton Street and I hope that my luck holds out for just another few blocks. If it does, I'll actually make it home undisturbed. I snort derisively at myself. I should have known better. By the time I spot them, it is too late. Ted grabs the cap from my head and laughingly tosses it to Neil, and so begins another game of Monkey in the Middle with me being, as always, the unwilling "monkey."

"Come on! Give me a break! My Mom's gonna kill me if I go home without my cap."

Neil holds it out to me, but as I reach to take it, he snatches it away again at the very last second.

He taunts me, "Poor Jeffy-weffy. Mommy's gonna be sooo vevy angwy. What you gonna do?" He drops the baby talk and the mock sympathy. "You want it, come and get it." He holds it way up high. I jump up to try to get it back, but I can't reach it. He throws it back to Ted.

I race back and forth between them, trying to get my cap. I jump up to try to intercept it when they toss it -- but let's face it, I'm no athlete. I'm short and fat and just plain clumsy. That usually doesn't bother me; my body is just the shell to hold the real me -- my brain. And that works just fine. Actually, at the risk of being immodest, it works better than fine -- I have the highest grades in my class in every subject. But there are times like this when I wish I could fly like Superman -- I'd grab the hat and soar into the clouds, far away from Ted and Neil and all the other kids. I'd even settle right now for having his Super breath -- I could suck the cap right down to me from mid-air. I sigh and keep on jumping. When I realize that it is hopeless, I collapse on the

ground with a thud.

My Mom yelled at me the last time this happened. "You lost your hat again? You think money grows on trees? Here I slave my life away at that factory to put a roof over your head, food in your belly, and clothes on your back, and what is the thanks I get? A son who is so thoughtless he can't even keep track of the clothes I worked so hard to buy him."

I've long since given up on trying to reason with my Mom or to tell her what really happened to the things that go missing. The only person she ever listens to is her boyfriend-of-the-week. She doesn't have time for me.

The thought of yet another lecture on my "irresponsibility" and the unfairness of the situation is just too much for me. I start to cry. I hate myself for my weakness. Superman would never cry.

I sink into my misery and tune out the boys' continued mocking. They see that they have achieved their objective -- they have asserted once again their "superiority" over me -- and they see that I am not heeding their continued teasing, so they toss the cap down into a mud puddle and walk away in search of fresh prey.

My tears gradually end, and I pick up my cap, squeeze it as dry as I can, and head for home. I let myself in, then prepare and eat dinner while my Mom is out with her latest guy -- Clayton, I think his name is. I read as I eat my dinner, but I wish there were someone to talk to, instead. Mom comes home while I am completing my homework, and, after a casual inquiry into my day, she turns on the TV, and I am once again left to my own thoughts.

Gym class. My most despised activity. I am, once again, chosen last when the teams are picked. And I am being generous with the word "chosen." It would be more accurate to say that one team wound up being stuck with me. As I walk over to the group, I hear my teammates saying things like, "Aw. Why do we hafta have *him*? Can't he be on the other team?" The fact that I am always the first one chosen for review games and other academic contests does nothing to take away the sting of being chosen last *every single time* in gym. I'll bet if Superman ever had to be in gym class, he would always have been chosen first.

Today was the last straw. I just found out that my best friend -- all right, my only friend -- is moving to the other coast. I wish I could fly like Superman; I'd be able to see Jeremy after school whenever I wanted. But as it is, I'll soon have no one to talk to. No one who will say a single civil word to me. As long as I had one friend who understood me, in whom I could confide, life was bearable. But no more. I can't handle the thought of going morning to night, day after day, without ever seeing a friendly face turned my way. I climb onto the roof of my apartment building, take a deep breath, and summon the courage to jump. I decide to pretend that I am Superman and am merely jumping to take off for a flight. I step up on the ledge, close my eyes, and leap.

I wonder whether I will be conscious long enough to feel any pain when I hit the sidewalk. Suddenly I feel two arms cradling me and then the direction of movement reverses. When we stop moving, I open my eyes to find Superman setting me gently down onto the roof. He sits down and gestures an invitation for me to do the same. Numbed by the unexpected turn of events, I comply.

He looks at me with eyes full of compassion and quietly asks me if I would like to talk about what just happened, about what could be so horrible to make me want to end my life.

It's funny. I had always thought that meeting him would be a dream come true; the fulfillment of a fantasy; that if it ever happened, I would be ecstatic. Instead, I find myself engulfed in

bitterness.

“How could *you* possibly understand? What do you know of rejection and loneliness?”

I am taken aback to see his eyes cloud over and the corners of his mouth curve slightly into a frown. When his answer finally comes, it is subdued. “You’d be surprised.” He shakes his head as if to force himself out of his introspection, gives me an inviting smile, and says, “Try me.”

I don’t know why, but I find myself opening up to him. I tell him about the constant teasing at school: the torture that is gym class, eating lunch with my nose in a book, pretending not to hear the other kids’ teasing, the brief respite of review games, the walks home. I end my litany with Jeremy’s impending move. “And now there’ll be no one I can talk to. No one who understands me.”

“Believe it or not, Jeff, I understand you.”

“How could you understand me? We’re nothing alike. Everyone likes you.”

Astoundingly, there is a touch of bitterness in his own voice as he answers. “We’re more alike than you could possibly know. For one thing, people don’t like me -- they only like what I can do. You know how you said that the other kids choose you first in the academic review games and then desert you as soon as the game is over? Well, if ever my powers were to leave me, everyone would abandon me, too.

“And you know how you said you sometimes just want to be like other kids -- how you would love to just be able to have fun in a group? That’s exactly how I feel sometimes. People treat me differently than everyone else, too. Can you honestly picture me, say, playing in a friendly baseball game, or exchanging jokes with a group of buddies over dinner?”

Try as I might, I cannot imagine such events. I shake my head.

He grimaces. “Nor, apparently, can anybody else. I’ve never been asked to do either. Or anything else just for the fun of it. If I want to play ball, I have to play all by myself. And the invitations I receive are always to charity events. I do accept the invitations when I can; there are a lot of good causes out there. But I am under no illusion that it is *me* they want, only my crowd-drawing ability.

“Sometimes, I just wish there would be one person who would invite me to dinner -- not to hero worship me, not to demand anything from me, but just to be a friend.”

“But you can fly. Doesn’t that make a difference?”

As he had been unburdening himself, he had been looking at his hands, clasped in his lap. But now he turns his gaze back to me. “I do enjoy flying, but it’s just as lonely up there as it is down here.”

He sees I am somewhat skeptical, and so he continues. “Does having a terrific vocabulary and being able to do math in your head make a difference in gym class?”

I sigh dejectedly. “I wish!”

“Nothing we can do ever replaces having friends. But you already know that -- Isn’t that why you’re so upset about Jeremy leaving?”

I nod in the affirmative, and he gives me a rueful grin. “Now do you believe I understand you?”

I nod again and then tentatively speak. “Do you like hot dogs and French fries? ‘Cause that’s what I’m making for supper. My Mom probably won’t be home for another few hours, and I don’t want to eat alone again. Would you like to have dinner with a new friend?”

I never knew Superman could smile so brightly. “Sounds perfect. Thank you.”

And with that, we head down to my apartment.

Oh, I realize that Superman has better things to do than to spend a lot of time hanging around with a nine-year-old kid. I

know that I may never see him again in person after our meal. But just knowing that his is a kindred spirit makes me feel better. Tonight doesn’t change anything at school; I’m still going to be on the outside looking in. But at least I know that I’m in the best of company.

And who knows? Perhaps the next time Ted or Neil snatches my cap, I may get a little Super assist in getting it back.

THE END